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ABSTRACT

While vocabulary is the concern of beginning students of English as a second language (ESL) and essays are the focus of advanced students, syntax is the domain of the intermediate course, with an emphasis on sentence combining. One method divides the course into four segments: (1) using, varying, and rearranging connectors; (2) ordering thoughts in English; (3) choosing and varying styles; and (4) eliminating faulty constructions. The approach covers small amounts of new information very slowly and thoroughly. The text used is a common one, but most texts with adequate sentence sets for combining would be appropriate, and they need not be designed for ESL. Vocabulary, punctuation, and grammar are handled as supplementary to the central issue of sentence combining, and the jargon presented to students is limited to what is necessary for the task. At least one writing assignment is required each week, especially necessary for students who will find themselves in college composition classes. These compositions go through several rewriting stages and sessions of peer criticism. (MSE)

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SENTENCE COMBINING FOR THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL ESL STUDENT

MIDTESOL CONFERENCE

October 15, 1983

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Dr. Levi Cutler, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Kentucky, used to say that "The only purpose of any English course is to help the student manipulate the language." Through the years, I have often thought of this statement, using it as a measuring instrument every time I make a daily assignment, write a test (or grade one), or prepare a lecture. After thinking about this for nearly fifteen years, I've decided that he is rather right. GRAMMAR by itself is of little use, except in so much as students master it so that they can manipulate it as an occupational tool (as in the case of business or technical writing students) or as a mark of being quote-unquote educated, or as a ticket to social elevation or what not in so far as this idea survives socially. The same is true of teaching syntax, paragraph development, or even the all-central essay. Writing them well, meeting required formats, and adhering to models are of themselves rather banal practices in pedagogy, which, like grammar, deserve to be dismissed with contempt . . . and students rightfully do so. However, the dismissal can come only after the mastery, and the contempt can be legitimately displayed only after the manipulation. Never for a moment would I entertain the idea of NOT teaching grammar, syntax, paragraph development, and rhetoric itself, which must be taught forcefully and effectively from the first grade and thereafter.

In so far as the ESL student is concerned, this matter of manipulating the language to suit his own purposes is of even a more pronounced importance. Beginning students must master the word, which on the immediate hand means vocabulary acquisition and retention. Advanced students, at least those at the college level, should master the essay (in the sense that this applies to native English speakers enrolled in college composition classes). There is of course a long

hard row-to-hoe between learning cat-dog-window-door to a polished, or even moderately acceptable, library research paper in a Composition II class. The middle ground is what I am taking up: the, for lack of a better phrase, there is no better phrase, intermediate level ESL student.

Among college level composition teachers as well as the rhetorical theocrats who write composition texts, there is, as all of us know, a long-standing argument over where to start, where to go, and where to finish writing classes: diction (the word), syntax (the sentence), or paragraphics (we, of course, have no such word, and I blush to use it in print). Also, as you realize, composition books have taken up this matter of approaching writing in every conceivable order and mixture of orders. Obviously, it is not my purpose to take it up once again, and for two reasons: First, the rather trivial fact is that it has little to do with the teaching ESL students; second, it does not need to be "taken up" so much as it simply needs to be "pointed out." All logic tells us that beginning ESL students must first learn words, words, words, and more words, yes, hundreds more. Similarly, I think all will agree that advanced students should be able to compete and survive in Composition I. The in-between student is again one whom I would call "intermediate"; his TOEFL scores are between 400-525; he can write short English sentences which are almost always understood by native speakers and which require only a few marks in red by his English teacher. He has mastered, in the sense that he recognizes and recalls, a few thousand standard vocabulary words; he has learned the principle parts of 82 irregular English verbs--and he knows how to use them without error. In short, he has at his command enough of the language that he is ready to begin a little manipulation.

Before addressing how best to help him do this, I want to emphasize my first main point, which is that syntax is the domain of intermediate level ESL

courses. By this I mean that the central impetus for the organization and execution of courses at this level should be the study of sentences. Once more, vocabulary and basic grammar are the acknowledged terrain of basic courses in ESL, and the essay should be the matter of concern for advanced ESL students (at least those pursuing degrees at American universities). Middle-level students (while they should still of course be learning more vocabulary and grammar, and while they should be similarly receiving a fine basis for writing essays by learning rhetorical terms and understanding their application) should spend most of their time working with sentences.

This work (that is, the content of intermediate level ESL courses) can be divided into two parts; the first, and more important, is sentence combining; the second, an offshoot of the first, is working with sentence style, by which I mean helping the student with such matters as parallel structure, dangling and misplaced modifiers, or wordiness; and perhaps, when you have a class of very good students, writing convoluted, inverted, or periodic sentences. In passing, I would point out that my students have never got that far along; but then, my Composition I students often do not either.

Accordingly, my intermediate level ESL courses are divided into four segments, all of which center around sentence combining. These are, as I take them up in turn:

1. using, varying, and rearranging connectors
2. ordering thoughts in English
3. choosing and varying styles
4. eliminating faulty constructions

In my intermediate level ESL courses, we spend about four weeks on each of these. I meet my students one hour each day M-F, and they have a minimum of

2-3 hours of homework each night. As we go along, I also work in problems of more advanced grammar, include vocabulary assignments, and require that they write either a long paragraph or short essay almost every week. This may sound demanding to you; and if you have students only three hours each week, you could never proceed with this much rigor and activity. However, I have taken as my motto a quotation from Oscar Wilde, who once said that "Nothing exceeds like excess!" My intermediate students do spend a minimum of 15 hours each week studying English: five hours in class and another ten preparing exercises and papers. I do not in any way find this an unreasonable amount of time, especially when considering the omnipresence of English in their daily lives and programs of study--moreover, I am especially sensitive about their ability to take Composition I in a class with American students and do well.

My first item of business is invariably the same: using connectors. But before the students can use them, they must know what they are, what they mean, and what their functions are in terms of combining sentences. So I have them commit to memory lists of "connectors" with their identifying name-tags. Among these are:

1. Coordinate conjunctions
2. Subordinate conjunctions
3. Adverbial conjunctions
4. "Addition connectors"--in addition, moreover, etc.
5. "Ordinate connectors"--first, second, last, etc.
6. "Contrasting connectors"--but, however, on the contrary, etc.
7. "Comparing connectors"--similarly, likewise, etc.
8. "Cause/effect connectors"--consequently, therefore, etc.
9. "Chronological connectors"--then, later, etc.

10. "Illustrative connectors"--for example, for instance, etc.

11. "Summary connectors"--in conclusion, finally, etc.

The exercises for this section of the course require that a student be able to take two short sentences and identify which kind of connector is appropriately required. For example, "It was raining" and "I carried an umbrella" must probably be connected with a "cause/effect connector." We go down the list and discuss which words of this group will work, and which will not, and also where the connectors are located, must be located, within the sentence. The student must, of course, fully understand why "Because it was raining, I carried an umbrella" will work while "Because I carried an umbrella, it was raining" will not work. Now, I'm sure all English teachers have worked with such constructions, locations, and variations before, whether with ESL students or native speakers; and my giving you such a basic example probably adds little to your storehouse of knowledge from your own experiences. However, my suggestion, which I think you will find more novative, is for you to go through such basic sentence combinations with painstaking, tedious, thoroughness. Most students need it, and I have found that spending ten minutes on one such sentence, explaining every little nuance of meaning and variation of the combining process, goes a lot farther toward improving the student's abilities to manipulate the language than, say, covering ten such sentences, or twenty, in the same ten-minute period. As you proceed, of course, you will want to increase the number and length of the sentences being combined; so that gradually and surely the student will be able to take something like this:

It happened last March.
I was in Omaha.
It was raining.
I carried an umbrella.
The umbrella had a big hole in it.
I got wet.

and transform it into

> Last March when I was in Omaha, it was raining and so I carried an umbrella; but I got wet because it had a big hole in it.

My advice, once again, is to cover a little territory very slowly when you first work with intermediate-level students carrying out sentence combining assignments. Spend a lot of time on even the most basic of connections. I have found that intermediate-level ESL students don't usually understand many of the differences and shades of meanings. Help them absorb these. A teacher will get a better pay-off when his students write their final papers.

After I am confident that my students know all of the connectors and their name-tags, and after they are able to take short sentences such as given above and transform these into correctly worded, flawlessly punctuated, longer sentences, I then take up what I call "ordering thoughts." This is actually a period of advanced sentence combining in which the techniques are harder for the teacher to teach and trickier for the student to learn. Again, I start by requiring the mastery of some grammatical terms: Present and past participial phrases, relative phrases and clauses, infinitive phrases, and appositives. Students are first required to learn grammatical definitions of these terms; then they must recognize these constructions in sentences I give them; third, they must be able to take a given kernel sentence and correctly insert the prescribed construction into it. For example, the instructions might be "Insert a relative clause into the sentence The man loved his wife." And so, the student writes something like The man who lives next door loves his wife. Of course, the instructions daily become more involved and demanding: "Insert a past participial phrase, relative clause, and appositive into the sentence The man loved his wife." And so the student writes Having had many sleepless nights, the man who lives next door loves Quan-tang, his wife. I would caution that

progress toward such expectations will be slow at first. But at the same time intermediate level students can master such assignments legitimately toward the end that they will write better constructed, more effective sentences in their composition classes and thereafter.

When students are able to carry out instructions such as the one in the last example, I then begin a section of the course on choosing and varying styles. This time, students are relieved that they do not have to master a number of grammatical terms (and of course I am even more relieved that I don't have to teach such things). Their first assignment is to write a 500-word essay on some harmless, mundane topic such as "American Food" or "The Person I Miss Most At Home." The only requirement is that no sentence have more than ten words. This is simple enough to carry out and always gets done rather painlessly. But, then, of course, game time starts. The second assignment is for each student to rewrite his own paper--this time, no sentence may have fewer than thirty words, and all of the original kernel sentences must be retained rather as they were originally written. (Thirty words is, by the way, the average length of a sentence in English.) On the third-time around, each student is given the second write of <u>another</u> student's paper, which he is then assigned to convert back to sentences of no more than ten words. This may seem to some like a little too much cat and mouse, but not so. Each of these write-throughs is logically geared to better prepare the student for writing more effective, well-generated, sentences in English; that is, to better prepare him for composition classes through manipulating the language. Specifically, writing which can by law have no more than ten words provides ample opportunity for the teacher to explain the wickedness of <u>choppiness</u> and how to avoid it on later written assignments. The second assignment in which the students re-write their papers

in sentences with no fewer than thirty words forces students to use the techniques for constructing effective sentences through using plausible combinations. Similarly, having them reduce another student's paper back to sentences with no more than ten words forces the same exposure, from the opposite angle. I would also add that when students realize that another student will be reading his paper as well as the teacher, the quality often perks up. Finally, when all of this is carried out, I give students copies of their own write-throughs (#2) and have them go through and identify by name all of the connectors they learned during the first few weeks, as well as all of the grammatical constructions they learned in the "ordering thoughts" section of the course. This, too, proves very effective. Finally, we take another two weeks and do the whole thing again, starting with a second written assignment in which no sentence has more than ten words. With each combination or reduction that a student makes, his abilities to manipulate the language increase and he becomes better prepared for a course in composition with native speakers.

I end the course, as already indicated, by having students complete exercises which take up faulty parallelism, dangling and misplaced modifiers, and wordiness. I proceed with them the same way as I do with American students in Basic Writing or composition classes. The problems are the same, and my treatment is identical and probably coincides with what most of you already do. Students first learn these terms; then they identify by name these problems in sets of poorly written sentences which I provide; finally, they write corrections of poorly structured sentences.

Before concluding, I would also say a word about texts. I use William Strong's SENTENCE COMBINING AND PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT, but I use it more as an aid than as a central text. I would impress upon you that virtually any text

which takes up sentence combining, provided that it has a good number of sets to be combined, would be serviceable. The book I use was not written with ESL students in mind, but this causes little difficulty. As a matter of fact, I am aware of only one text which takes up sentence combining for ESL students--Marvin Coates' THINKING IN ENGLISH. Since a few of my students often must repeat the course, I trade off texts each semester. I would indicate, however, that neither of these follows the organization, ideology, or vocabulary that I have provided you with, and so examine carefully complimentary copies before sending in a book order.

I would also say that Sentence Combining as a topic certainly has its advocates and enemies, most of whom are outspoken in the area of Basic Writing. For my part, sentence combining can be a very effective way to teach an intermediate level ESL student, and it certainly prepares them for Composition I. However, I am in no way on a sentence combining bandwagon, and those of you who are currently teaching successful classes would probably do just as well to continue doing what you're doing. At the same time, those of you who are new to the trade or who may not feel very comfortable with the improvement of your students while they work under you might perhaps consider my suggestions more carefully. Here is some advice for those who fall into this latter group:

1. Make sentence combining central to the content and organization of your intermediate level courses. Include matters of vocabulary, punctuation, and grammar as supplementary material.

2. Minimize the vocabulary, i.e., the jargon that must be learned by the second language speakers. The two lists I have indicated earlier are probably all the terms that are necessary.

3. Insist upon total mastery of the terms you do expose them to

4. Proceed slowly at first, and increase the pace gradually as you realize the students' mastery of the materials.

5. Above all, give at least one writing assignment each week. This is especially a necessity for students who will eventually find themselves in college composition classes.